

Waiting with Love: Are You Ready?

Matthew 25:1-13 and Luke 2:1-7
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Are you ready? It's Christmas Eve, you know. While this is certainly a question asked by the culture in general, when Scripture asks this question of you and me, Scripture is not inquiring about whether you and I have "checked all the boxes" of our personally perceived "Christmas-need-to-do lists." The "are you ready?" question from Scripture applies not simply to November and December of a calendar year in North America. This "are you ready?" question from Scripture is an everyday of every week of every month inquiry wondering about your and my preparedness (or not) to receive the presence of God, with God's desire to draw near and be received and be celebrated and be served. How would you and I know if you and I are ready? To have a helpful answer to this question from Scripture, I'm informed by a particular parable Jesus taught near the end of his in-the-flesh ministry and life, as well as by an extrapolation from Jesus' birth story, as told from Luke's Gospel account.

For as much of my 64 plus years as I've been reading, studying, or have been taught from Scripture, I've puzzled over, and even worried over the parable of the ten bridal attendants. Five of the attendants are said to have been wise since they packed extra oil for their lamps in case their waiting for the bridegroom took longer than expected. Five of the attendants are said to have been foolish (the actual word in New Testament Greek is "moronic") because they packed no extra lamp oil, and they had to go to the Home Depot or Lowe's or Ace Hardware for extra oil – or, we might say, extra new batteries – because the bridegroom was delayed, and their oil (or batteries) ran out. The parable has always seemed harsh in judgment to me. It is a "readiness" parable. One needs to stay vigilant if one hopes to be alert and prepared when the presence of God draws near. Who wants to miss any holy and blessed encounter? No one in their right mind or in their best imaginable faith. Yet how is this parable to be interpreted further, we might say, "in its specifics"?

Only most recently have I concluded that this parable has a high likelihood of kinship to the two parables of Jesus which follow it in chapter 25 of Matthew's story-telling. The second of the three parables (25:14-30) seeks of those who follow Jesus a willingness to make calculated risks in stewardship. The primary sin, one might conclude is not losing but hoarding – sitting on one's gifts because losing is so immensely feared. The third of the three parables (25:31-46) calls for eyes of faith to recognize Jesus – the Messiah / the Savior – whenever anyone is in need. The one in need is, in fact, an embodiment of God who seeks the caring love of all others of God's people, and who seeks for such love to be expressed in relation to the needs of God's people.

If prayerful, calculated risks in the stewarding of one's gifts is the subject of the next parable, and if having eyes of faith to see in the needs of the marginalized the very person of God who meets us in Jesus, then – it seems to me – helpful and legitimate to interpret the first parable in the chapter as if lamp oil is an issue because love is an issue. Have you packed enough love for your lamp to be burning when you think God is no where close? If you and I have not packed enough love, it will be evident when God draws near, because you and I will not be willing to go out of our accustomed ways to cross the lines of our preferred orderliness and to invest ourselves with the one or ones in need of our partnership.

Let me repeat: All three parables in Matthew 25 combined may indicate that "if you and I have not packed enough love, it will be evident when God draws near; because you and I will not

be willing to go out of our accustomed ways to cross the lines of our preferred orderliness and invest ourselves with the one or ones in need of our partnership.”

Let’s shift then to Luke, chapter 2, the first seven verses, when Joseph and Mary enter Bethlehem. We are told only that all the rooming establishments were indicating “no vacancy.” Extra-canonical story-tellers offer two versions of the “no vacancy.” One version tells how every inn-keeper turned away the couple from Nazareth. “No room here tonight,” each one said, either politely or gruffly. The message was the same in two ways: (1) what was said - “No room here tonight” – and (2) how it was said – with no innkeeper willing to cross his / her lines of preferred orderliness and invest themselves with Joseph and his very pregnant traveling companion. In this version, we presume that Joseph finds shelter on his own, locating a garage door that was not locked, or a covered parking place with shelter from the wind; and Mary delivers her baby where they have moved in without permission.

A second version of story-tellers, however, indicates that one innkeeper had eyes of faith and enough love in his or her lamp of recognition to go out of the innkeeper’s preferred orderliness protocol, grab a flashlight or lantern, lock the front door for a few minutes, and lead the desperate man and his pregnant partner out back to a garage with corner space or to a stable with a vacant stall. The inn-keeper showed them where they could bed-down, and then returned to the front desk. Going out of our way for others – whether we actually have met them before, or not – indicates a readiness in love to receive, celebrate, and serve the Holy One of all who draws near, often in the person of someone or someones different from us and possibly in substantial need of support or assistance.

David A. Anderson is an African-American and a Protestant pastor who, in 2007, wrote a book entitled, “Gracism: the Art of Inclusion.” He tells of being in his 20s, when he was hired to serve on the ministry team of a large church in an affluent Chicago suburb. On the first day he was to work there, he was stopped by the township’s police on his way to the church, on his way out to lunch, coming back from lunch, and leaving to go home. The officers were each different. Three had been male. One was female. All were white. None gave him a ticket. No one treated him harshly (p.10). He sensed that day, he writes, that there might be a problem in that suburb. His concluding chapter asks the question: “How can I become a gracist?” Anderson argues that racism and other forms of discrimination are inherently narrow, so that the group favored by one’s self excludes others who are different. “Gracism,” he believes, recognizes distinctions but is broad-beyond-categories in definition and in practice (p.154) . . . He writes further, “If we don’t purpose to relate to others whom we can otherwise easily ignore, we will miss the blessing of gracism. In relating to all others, however, we will reap the wonderful learning that comes when we reach out. Namely, that we ourselves have been reached and blessed in ways we never knew. When we seek to include, we discover that the very ones we reached out to have something we are missing. There is a part of God we lack when we exclude others, since those others reflect something of the One that we could not see in any other way.” (p.158-59)

Let us not be morons failing to pack enough love from which to serve God’s people of all types. Five wedding attendants packed enough love from which to serve, even when the hours were extended and long. Possibly a Bethlehem inn-keeper packed enough love from which to assist and serve – going out of his way one crowded night in his town for a man and a very pregnant woman from another region. How about you and me? God’s love – always broadening – doesn’t seem ever to run out. Each day God’s love is made available to us in bulk. We can always pack and carry more than we estimate. Are we ready? – All honor and praise be to God.